

Grace Happens Here: The Human Relations Laboratory

Author: Hollis Guill Ryan

It is a Saturday morning in August. The sun is already warming the meadow where a large white pavilion tent stands. Singly and in clusters, women, men, teens, and a few small children gather in the tent and form a circle. Some appear to be meditative, while others are chatty. Gradually, all turn their attention to a tall, slender woman standing in the center of the circle. She quietly invites everyone to stand, allowing those who are unable to join to remain seated. A guitarist and a drummer join her as she begins a chant, and the group begins a now-familiar Dance of Universal Peace. As the dance continues, people greet each other with their eyes, the youngest and oldest moving together rhythmically, harmonizing and blending their voices. The music ends, people return to their places in the circle, and turn their attention to an older man, who welcomes them and reminds them that this is the last day of a weeklong event, The Human Relations Lab. To claim their experience of their week and to prepare to return to their everyday lives, he asks people to say a few words about what Lab has been like for them.

First to speak is a little girl, who giggles and says she loves being able to play all the time for a whole week with her best friend. The adults around her smile, remembering the squabbles the two girls had and how the older children helped them work through their difficulties. “Can we go play now?” she asks, and the two of them scamper outside to join the other children.

“Me, too,” says a dark-haired man. “I feel like I’ve been playing all week with my best friends. And to think that a week ago, I didn’t know another person here!”

An older woman, her cane propped beside her chair, volunteers, “This must be the twelfth time I’ve come to Lab, and every time, it just gets better. I feel as if I’ve been able to review my life and prepare myself for the next step of my journey. I haven’t slept very well, but I feel refreshed.”

“This is the second time I’ve offered leadership at Lab,” says a middle-aged man. “I’ve been studying what it takes to form community for a week and to deepen that experience so it’s not just a warm-fuzzy, feel-good time. It’s very do-able, even with the random collection of folks who show up here—and to do it consciously and intentionally. And I think I can transfer these skills to other areas of my life. Yay!”

This is a glimpse of the Goodenough Community’s Human Relations Laboratory which has brought people together every year since 1970 for a weeklong experience of community that is deliberately created in the moment among the people who happen to be there that week.

People who experienced the joy of life at Lab sought each other out between Labs in order to practice living fully, freely, and relationally. After a few years of this informal association, these friends intentionally formed a community, The American Association for the Furtherance of Community, also known as the Goodenough Community. The community now sponsors the Human Relations Laboratory from which it sprang.

The Lab feels like an annual tribal gathering where far-flung members come for a week to hang out together, to welcome newcomers, and to remember those who are not present. While having a good time together, Lab participants accomplish many tasks on several levels—personal growth; establishing and renewing friendships; studying

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philosophies and applying them to daily life; improving the Goodenough Community's organization; caring for the land on which the Lab is grounded—while taking time away from the chores of daily life.

Its tribal feel can be attributed to the experience of its founder, Dr. John L. Hoff, who as a child was raised among natives of the far north. He soaked up the warmth of community that occurred naturally among his native friends, and as a young teen vowed that when he grew up, he would “build an orphanage for white kids where they could learn to live like natives.” Trained in human growth and spiritual development, John embraced a life's work of creating havens for human development. John was trained in community building at National Training Laboratories (NTL) and worked among the Pacific Northwest native tribes. In the 1960s, he formed a partnership with other therapists and social workers to begin presenting The Human Relations Laboratory.

High among the memories John brings from his childhood is the joy and freedom he experienced among the natives. There, a festive atmosphere permeated every activity. The sacred was visible and honored in even the most mundane events. At the Lab, leadership takes special care to encourage the development of a celebratory yet sacred culture, one that helps participants explore their inwardness, recognize and express their feelings, and connect with others in sustained, meaningful ways. Musical expression, dancing, and humor abound. Lifeways encourage group and individual meditation, opportunities to develop friendships, norms that people do chores in teams rather than alone ... Joan Valles says, “Each day at Lab is a festival of shared meals, singing, dance, playing with kids, intimate conversation, collaborative work, and more.”

As the name implies, the work of the Laboratory is to experiment, using relationships to learn about one's human-ness. Robert Scully describes his experience of his first Lab, where the theme of compassion formed the cornerstone of the week's curriculum and where he honed his newfound skills with other participants:

For the most part, I've lived life as an individual with a variety of personal growth experiences and fleeting connections with communities. At Lab, I was challenged to embrace intention, humility, and the inner work as a first step toward becoming a more compassionate person. The “compassionate pals” activity [which worked like a Secret Buddy game] created an opening for me to get to know someone who I would not have expected to connect with. The shell of individuality began to crack. Throughout the week I took a leap into revealing my true self, including the warts, to a circle of people who were genuinely listening to me. Likewise, I listened to others reveal themselves. No judgment, analysis, or tried-and-true advice—just listening to each other with openness and acceptance. There were times when I would slow down and look around me and think, “This is how life could be,” with people sharing in the work, the shoulder rubs, the dancing, singing, deep conversation, and laughter.

What tribe or community would be complete without children? Today, with children of all ages present, it is hard to remember that it was 20 years after its founding before children were included in Lab. In the beginning, Lab concentrated on adult

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personal growth and most participants assumed it would be difficult to do the often emotional and vulnerable work of psychological and spiritual growth with youngsters present. Transitioning from an adults-only environment to genuinely welcoming children was a bumpy road. For example, troubles among the children have provided adults with a reason to avoid dealing with their own issues. Parents become over-involved in their children's experience, rather than allowing the kids to work things out for themselves. Yet these same dynamics have proven rich as the other participants encourage the adults to pay attention to their own behaviors and attitudes, especially regarding the children. And, when children are asked what they notice, their observations of adult behavior are usually insightful and eye-opening!

Marjorie Gray, a single woman without children, says, "I learned that I could enjoy kids. Their spontaneity and fresh perspectives bring out my own inner child and creativity. I found I do, in fact, have maternal instincts, and that I have a valuable, less-"invested" perspective to offer, as an 'auntie'."

How do kids feel about Lab? As Wesley Boone, now 16, succinctly puts it, "I've been taken to a few Labs. Now I come because I *want* to come."

At the other end of the spectrum are the aging and elderly who are examples of life-long learning. Of course, learning is a two-way street between teacher and student, as Joan Valles, an older participant, points out, "At last summer's Lab, our theme was 'Experiencing Compassionate Community,' and I was a lucky test case. Recovering from hip replacement surgery, I was waited on hand and foot. It was a lesson for me in receiving and an opportunity for others to put the theme into practice."

If you were to listen in on participants, you would hear stories about the challenging personal and social work required to bring about true community, moving beyond simple camaraderie to almost inevitable discord before deepening into a trustworthy sense of community. Hollis Ryan recalls a time when the formation of community at Lab threatened to end in chaos:

After a few days at Lab, I was feeling warm and cozy with my newfound and longtime friends. Then one participant started complaining, stridently, that the circle felt too constricted. She felt that because her experience was different from everyone else's, she was unwelcome. I felt shaken up, I couldn't see her point of view, and I didn't like it that she was disrupting my rosy life. Pretty soon, almost everyone was taking sides, either wanting to make big changes, or wanting everything to stay just the same. The whole Lab community went through turmoil for a day and a half, and I was upset the whole time. I didn't want to change just to accommodate one person. It felt as if we'd reached a stalemate and that this Lab would go down in history as the time we permanently lost the experience of community. Then three or four people staged a skit light-heartedly poking fun at our situation, demonstrating a silly solution. Suddenly, we were all laughing at ourselves and feeling friendly again. Soon we had realigned ourselves in a way that everyone—including the

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“troublemaker”—felt OK about. At last, we had true community. Not lovey-dovey, but deep, inclusive, intentional community.

I’ve tried to remember this breathtaking experience as a reminder to be open to change, and to listen for the good intention behind even harsh criticism.

When true community is, at last, created, the results are life-changing, as Sue-Marie Casagrande describes. “I literally felt as though I fell in love with every single person present. The residual effects are that I have an expanded heart. I am uplifted to know there are other people in my area who are committing themselves to compassion and to engaging with others and the rest of the world in an integrative, mutually supportive way.”

Lab is central to the Goodenough Community, whose leaders bring back heightened personal, social, and organizational awareness. Barbara Brucker, a leader within the Goodenough Community for two decades, describes the reasons that Lab remains important to her:

Each summer I return to Lab and now serve the event in a variety of roles. Lab holds an intensity and focus that powerfully demonstrate community making a difference for individuals and a demonstration of community. I leave Lab each year having deepened my belief in the value of community and re-inspired for my work in community for the next year.”

Another long-time community member and leader, Joan Valles, explains why she returns to Lab.

Labs have become a yardstick by which I measure growth. Since my first Lab 14 years ago, I have been healing personally (emotionally and mentally), relationally (my circle of friends is wider and friendships are deeper), and socially (as a niche for serving others). Lab is a time of annual review and charting a course for my year ahead. These measures are enhanced and made meaningful by sharing them in community.

At a recent Lab, Kirsten Rohde, president of the community’s board, learned the benefit of compassion in leadership. “I cannot express compassion outward until I find compassion within myself, for myself. To offer more consistent and reliable compassion in my community, I must practice a discipline of self-care and self-compassion. It doesn’t take away from my service to my community and beyond, but is time well spent and helps me be more steady, positive, and hopeful in my leadership.”

Richard Kenagy, community president, has found that his leadership style has changed. “I have been educated in the reality of energy, and I am growing more skillful at working with a group’s energy and my own. I am more receptive, so I experience less resistance to my leadership.”

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As you listen to Lab participants talking about Lab, you are probably catching on to the fact that Lab is an enchanting experience. How does Lab—and the “magic” of community—come about?

Irene Perler, coordinator of the family program, reveals some of the practical preparation for ensuring a truly intergenerational community.

The village concept of living offers a lot to families, so we begin to cultivate possibilities before the event begins. Families fill out a questionnaire that helps us know the kinds of activities and connections that would support them, like pairing families with much in common, and having “aunties” and “uncles” adopt a family for a week. Intentionality adds value to experiences that might or might not otherwise happen “naturally” in a communal setting.

We plan for spontaneous creative outbursts, like baseball games complete with the national anthem, hot dogs, and peanuts; or campfire nights, with the makings for s’mores, and with staff who enjoy leading campfire songs and telling stories; or a parade with costumes, home-made floats, and an impromptu band.

We prepare families to have clear understandings of our guidelines for children and families. The clarity makes it safe for kids (and parents) to be free, and the guidelines show the strength of our culture.

Asked to describe techniques for forming community, John Hoff muses,

There are handbooks outlining the steps to create community. The process is practical, not esoteric. But, really, the most important thing is to remember that community is alive, with a spirit of its own. So, just as you would respond to any other being and its needs, creating community is responding to the lives and dynamics that are present. Of course, there are principles to guide leadership, but community growth does not respond well to a “cookie cutter” application of textbook techniques.

A Human Relations Laboratory is a place to openly examine your own heart and relationships. The secret is to create experiences with many levels: intellectual, emotional, social, cultural, and spiritual. Supporting people in their quest for health, truth, and love while enriching the environment with the very elements they are seeking—that is the formula for transformation.

John sums up, “The Human Relations Laboratory is not so much a program as it is an event. It happens to us partly because we have prepared well and put our hearts into it, and largely because grace happens there. Insight appears. Healing becomes reality. Everybody learns.”

Lab is, indeed, an experience of community.